

Access for All – “What is learned in youth is carved in stone”

by Donald Blome

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Education changes lives. Education opens doors. These are phrases I hear again and again from alumni of U.S. government sponsored exchange programs who decided to travel to the United States and study in a far off land. Why is education so impactful? Maybe it's because, as the old Arabic saying goes, “What is learned in youth is carved in stone.” This past week the American Consulate General in Jerusalem joined U.S. diplomatic missions worldwide to celebrate International Education Week – a time to focus on the benefits of international education and exchanges and to promote programs that prepare students and professionals for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

The theme of this year's International Education Week, “Access for All,” says a lot about what the United States values most in education and exchanges. Palestinians and Americans agree that everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or economic status has the right to education. And as a potent part of that education, studying abroad gives students a chance to take their classroom learning even further, by gaining fresh perspectives, new ideas, and an increased understanding of our global responsibilities. The United States has a proud tradition of education and our colleges and universities are some of the world's finest. Diversity on our university campuses is one of the reasons for our success. To that end, universities in the United States welcome Palestinian students on their campuses. The U.S. government also wants Palestinians to study and do research alongside American students and researchers, and we want to make sure Palestinians know about the many exchange opportunities we offer.

A young Palestinian woman named Luna attended the launch of the U.S. Consulate General events for International Education Week. Luna recently returned from a Fulbright exchange program at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, California. She said studying in the United States changed her life and allowed her to meet inspiring professors, gain new insights, and learn about new cultures. But she also said her experience in the United States taught her about own home. It taught her more about what she wanted for her own country and her own future. I am heartened to see the number of Palestinian students who, just like Luna, have returned from studies in the United States to make an impact on their communities, economies, and societies.

From these alumni stories, and from my own experience, I can tell you why study abroad is so critical. When people leave the comfort of their communities and routines, and they find themselves in a new place surrounded by a new language and new social environments, they become aware of a world beyond their own. They learn to understand and appreciate different points of view. They learn to find similarities in the most surprising places, and they start to see new potential to make impactful change back at home. Not only will study abroad give Palestinians new skills and knowledge to be more competitive in the global marketplace; it will also equip Palestinians with experience, self-reliance, and global perspectives that are necessary to build a strong, vibrant, knowledge-based economy that a future Palestinian state truly deserves.

In addition to all of this is the fact that international education allows you to make real connections with people you wouldn't otherwise meet. Americans and Palestinians can know each other personally – they can learn about the daily challenges and frustrations, as well as the joys and celebrations, which define our days. They can tell each other the stories of their cultures that go beyond the headlines, and

I can guarantee that with this increased understanding we will have a better future for American and Palestinian cooperation. I can assure you that Palestinian students in America – and there were more than 450 studying in high schools and universities last year – make extraordinary ambassadors, building those personal friendships and shaping the views of every American they meet. This year saw a six percent increase in the number of Palestinians studying in the United States from the last academic year. My hope is that the number of Palestinians studying in the U.S. continues to grow.

This past month my colleagues and I at the American Consulate in Jerusalem had the chance to meet with Palestinian educators, students, and education leaders throughout Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. In our discussions, we heard the message loud and clear: the United States can do more to bring the American education experience to Palestinians through our existing bilateral programs. And we hope to do that through our venerable Fulbright exchange program for academics and students, our popular International Visitors Leadership Program which sends hundreds of professional Palestinians to the U.S., and the successful English Access Scholarship program, which remains the U.S. government's largest English learning program in the world.

We are working hard to make American educational exchanges more accessible for Palestinians than ever before. Through our EducationUSA program, we seek to provide easily-accessible information for prospective Palestinian students, and we provide regular information on U.S. government sponsored academic exchange opportunities and study abroad programs on our social media platforms. Our commitment to promoting travel and study in the United States is evident in the number of visas we issued last year to Palestinians. In 2014, we issued more visas to Palestinians than in any year in the last 10 years, and we hope to see that number continue to grow. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is also investing in Palestinian education programs that help raise the quality of teaching and curriculum. USAID's programs so far have impacted more than 94,000 students, contributing to higher standardized test scores in Arabic, English, math, and science.

Palestinian students like Luna deserve every opportunity to access a world-class education. And all Palestinian youth deserve access to an education system that helps them become globally-aware and internationally-conscious citizens. We end International Education Week with a promise that the U.S. Consulate General will remain committed to increasing educational opportunities for Palestinians and improving the quality of education for all. Why? Because education changes lives, opens doors and creates life-long memories that will be carved in stone for the benefit of both of our societies. Help us make this possible. Spread the word about the benefits of international education today.